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SUBJECT

: Soviet-Syrian Relations

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CLASSIFICATION**OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE**

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ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

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CLASSIFICATION

SECRET

No. 1359/66

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
8 June 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

Soviet-Syrian RelationsSummary

The present Syrian Government, more radical than its predecessor and isolated from the West and other Arab states, appears receptive to greater cooperation with the Soviet Union. However, the Soviets will move cautiously because of the unstable character of the regime in Damascus. In any event, Moscow's policy toward Syria must be viewed within the context of its general policies in the Middle East, and its relations with Egypt in particular, which the USSR has no wish to alienate. Although Moscow is seeking to take advantage of recent developments in the Arab world, it continues to operate pragmatically and to recognize definite limitations on the spread of its influence in the area. At the moment, the Soviets are working to promote unity among the Arab "progressives." Over the longer term, they hope to improve their position gradually, relying mainly on economic and military aid.

*Prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates.

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1. During the past year, Moscow has sought to expand its influence in the Middle East generally, notably in Iran and Turkey. A long-standing Russian coolness toward Syria began to thaw after a "progressive" but fragile regime seized power in February. Moscow's first reaction was cautious, indicating that it had some doubts about the staying power of the narrowly based government in a country chronically unstable. However, in April after a visit by Premier Zuayyin to the USSR, Moscow announced an agreement to provide Damascus with a \$133-million credit for construction of a dam on the Euphrates River.

2. It is probable that Moscow's immediate aim was to bolster the new government. Radio Moscow on 23 April said frankly that "the conclusion of this agreement will undoubtedly contribute to the important changes which took place in Syria recently." Soviet officials have also advised the Syrian Communist Party (CPS) to cooperate with the Nasirists and the left Baathists in support of the government. In addition, the Soviets have signed new delivery contracts under their old arms agreement with Damascus. No arms deliveries had been observed for about a year, but deliveries have begun again. Moscow has also apparently agreed to negotiate a new arms agreement with Damascus later this year.

3. While the Soviets have undoubtedly attempted to shore up the position of the new leadership in Damascus, they must also realize that it could be overthrown without much warning. In any event, fear of the withdrawal of Soviet aid is unlikely to deter Syrian dissidents bent upon a coup attempt. Consequently, the Russian decision to help with the Euphrates Dam was probably taken in the belief that any group likely to come to power in Syria in the foreseeable future--so long as it is not bitterly antagonistic to Nasir--will be reasonably satisfactory to Moscow. Moscow will not have to make a financial outlay on the dam for a year, during which time preliminary surveys will be made.

4. The new Syrian regime has announced that it wants the support of all domestic "progressive" elements. A Communist was included in the cabinet formed early in March, and several Communists reportedly have been given second-echelon positions in the government. The degree of Communist influence in the new regime is not yet, however, markedly greater than it was under the preceding regime. The latter had also included several Communists or Communist sympathizers in its expanded National Council of the Revolutionary Command, but they did not play any substantial role. The return of the exiled CPS Secretary Khalid Bakdash in April apparently came as a surprise to the regime, and he has been allowed to remain only on sufferance. The CPS still has no legal standing and it has so far gained the appearance rather than the reality of influence on government policy. In addition, there is reason to believe that Bakdash--long a foe of Nasir--only very reluctantly agreed to follow Soviet advice and to espouse rapprochement with the Nasirists.

5. It is within the context of Soviet policy toward Egypt and the Arab world generally that Moscow's recent actions in relation to Syria can be best explained. Since the middle 1950s, as today, Moscow in framing its policies toward the Middle East has assigned a higher priority to good relations with Egypt than any other state in the area. Ironically, however, Moscow's reliance on Nasir as an instrument for reducing Western influence in the area often acts as a brake on the independent expansion of Soviet influence in the rest of the Arab world, particularly in countries hostile to Nasir's pan-Arab aspirations. Conversely, while Cairo and Moscow have often found mutual advantages in political cooperation, both realize that over the long run they are competing for influence in the Middle East. Consequently, to the extent that Moscow, in seeking to increase its influence in Syria, gets out of step with Egypt, it risks alienating Nasir.

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6. The Soviets recognize that, at this juncture, the best means of balancing their interests in Cairo with those of Damascus is to encourage reconciliation between Nasir and his Baathist antagonists in Syria. Moscow probably feels that the time is propitious because of Nasir's need for "progressive" Arab support in a potential confrontation with the conservative Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. The Soviets have probably fostered Syria's initial steps toward such a rapprochement, including the dispatch of a Syrian delegation to the UAR to negotiate a trade and payments agreement, which was signed on 8 June.

7. A group of Arab Communists recently questioned a Soviet official about Nasir's policy toward the other "progressive" Arab forces. The Soviet official replied that Nasir had reason for distrusting Baathists and Communists, and that he could never forget their past and continued opposition to him. He said that, in view of the fact that Syria does not have a stable regime or a man strong enough to unite a majority behind himself, Nasir's wait-and-see policy toward Damascus was laudable. He pointed out that it was up to the leftist Baathists to take the first step toward collaboration with Nasir with a view toward "consolidating their strength in the face of both internal and external reactionary plots."

8. On 27 May Moscow, in a TASS statement, charged there was "stepped-up subversive activity of the imperialist powers and their reactionary allies in the Middle East" against such countries as Syria. Moscow added, somewhat histrionically, that "the Soviet Union cannot and will not remain indifferent to attempts at violating peace in the region in immediate proximity of the frontiers of the USSR." A similar message was also handed to the Israeli Government.

9. While attempting to feed the natural suspicion of most "progressive" Arab states about US intentions as a means of drawing them closer together, the Soviets realize that traditional rivalries in the Arab world cannot be eliminated in the near future. Since about mid-1963 the Baath regime in

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Syria has regarded Nasirist activity as the greatest threat to its survival, has periodically rounded up large numbers of suspected Nasirists, and has emitted a steady stream of anti-Nasirist propaganda. Syria's brief union with Egypt has left a residue of bitterness on the part of most Syrians, which would argue against an abrupt about-face toward Cairo. Moscow hopes to put a damper on the bitter polemics and political machinations which have accompanied the long-standing feud, and to obtain greater freedom to enhance its diplomatic position in Damascus without seriously jeopardizing its primary interests in Cairo.

10. Moscow's recent propaganda barrage against the US can also, in part, be explained by a desire to counter blasts emanating from Peking. Lately, China has been decrying Moscow's "betrayal" of the Arabs and alleged collaboration with imperialism in selling out the Arabs by urging a Tashkent type of solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute. Moscow probably feels particularly susceptible to such charges at a time when it is encouraging the consistently anti-Nasir Syrian Communist Party to cooperate with the Nasirists.

11. It is interesting to note in this regard that there may be some truth to Peking's charge of Soviet interest in bringing about a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute. During the past year, the Soviets have appeared interested in better relations with Israel, although the "rapprochement" continues to be limited by Moscow's greater interests in the Arab world. While the recent demarche to Israel was particularly harsh, it appeared aimed more at Washington than at Tel-Aviv.